

Equity and Quality in Higher Education

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“All institutions of higher education have the obligation to open the door more widely. Above all, those who educate more rigorously carry the highest obligation. You have the quality, the ability, the standing, and the support to press further. I hope you will show the will,” Nelson Mandela, on receiving an honorary doctorate degree from Amherst College, May 13, 2005.

On a recent visit to a university in South Africa to present a seminar, a question that came up frequently is the question of the apparent contradiction between issues of quality and issues of equity. The democratic South African government had wisely formulated policies to promote ‘equity and remedy’ while also promoting quality in higher education following centuries of institutionalized discrimination in education policy. Now there is a genuine concern among policy makers, administrators and faculty members that the extension of opportunities to historically disadvantaged students could result in a reduction of quality.

My response to this concern was to recognize its legitimacy. African people have always been at the forefront of the demand for equitable quality access to education. That was the issue that W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) debated passionately with Booker T. Washington at the end of slavery - whether people of African descent should be satisfied with technical training or whether what Du Bois called the talented tenth among them should aspire to the highest education possible? That question was eventually answered by the Supreme Court of America in the case of *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka* when it was ruled that an educational system that was separate was manifestly unequal in a democratic society. Alluding to the lessons that America and South Africa could learn from each other, Murray (1997) observes:

Among the many educational dilemmas the United States and South Africa share in common, this article highlights two: disparities in school funding and school dropout. The twist, however, is that in South Africa, the majority population has borne the brunt of educational segregation, discrimination, economic exploitation, and deprivation based on racial/ethnic differences; while in the U.S., minority groups have suffered these inequities. Nonetheless, the author maintains that the similar challenges each nation faces to improve education can be addressed by identifying the important educational lessons both can learn from each other.

That type of reasoning was why many youths rose up against the policy of Bantu education under apartheid and died fighting for quality equitable education. That was one of the key demands of the African Peoples's Organisation in the 1920s under the leadership of Dr Abdulla Abdulrahman who noted that when the Livingstone High School was approved for colored people in Cape Town, the Europeans hoped that it would be a failure but that he and his organization were determined to make it a huge success. It is for such contributions to South Africa that Nelson Mandela awarded him a posthumous Gold Medal in the last days of his presidency. Mandela himself stated in his biography that quality education was the surest means for the liberation of the African people.

Let us take a brief look at indicators of equitable access to education in South Africa with figures provided in the latest UNDP report on human development index. The report will support my argument that equity is indeed part of quality in educational policy and not a contradiction of quality. If education is provided to only one percent of the population, then it is by definition not a quality education because it lacks the quality of access. Similarly, if education is made available to all but its quality is poor, then it is neither equitable nor of high quality as Nelson Mandela implied in his challenge to selective educational institutions around the world in the above epigraph.

The fall in Human Development Index for South Africa back to the 1975 level, following the end of apartheid is probably based on the scourge of HIV/AIDS which has reduced life expectancy greatly. But sadly, the other black African countries remain far below the level of South Africa with hardly any progress from 1975 to 2004 perhaps due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the foreign debt burden, drought, civil war, corruption and poor equity in education, health and gender empowerment compared to the South Asian and Arab states that have made fast and consistent gains over the period. My hypothesis is that the poor rating of African countries on the HDI is correlated with their poor rating in education more than anything else and the table below, also from the HDI report of the UNDP seems to support that hypothesis. Thus increasing adult literacy rate to the level of Cuba, for instance, would help to reduce poverty, increase the probability of surviving past the age of 40 and with increased income, the number of people with access to safe drinking water while also reducing the percentage of children who are underweight. Of course, education is good in itself and even if it does not contribute to higher HDI rating, equitable access to quality education cannot be over-emphasized.

The Gender-related Development Index or GDI as compared to HDI is more difficult to understand because most countries have 90% or higher on such a comparison but 90% of what? In the cases of South Africa and Nigeria, it is saying that their GDI is about 1% lower than their already low HDI and that should be a cause for concern even if these countries have a 100% GDI to HDI comparison like Luxembourg. The key ingredient in the table below, like the one above is the adult literacy rate and you will see that the South Africa and Namibia have about 4% gender gap in adult literacy between women and men. Closing such gap through increased access to secondary and tertiary education as South Africa is trying

to do (100.9%) is a good idea but it is also urgent to aim for 100% literacy rate as part of the strategy. Martineau (1997) addresses the gender issue as follows:

Creating a system that provides quality education and training for all -young and old, regardless of race, class, or gender-is probably the greatest developmental challenge facing the South African government today. Women (and girls), particularly those of African origin, have been largely excluded from analyses of South African education. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining South Africa’s educational progress generally and that of it’s women specifically, especially African women, along with a discussion of the factors affecting the education of women in South Africa and possibilities for future redress.

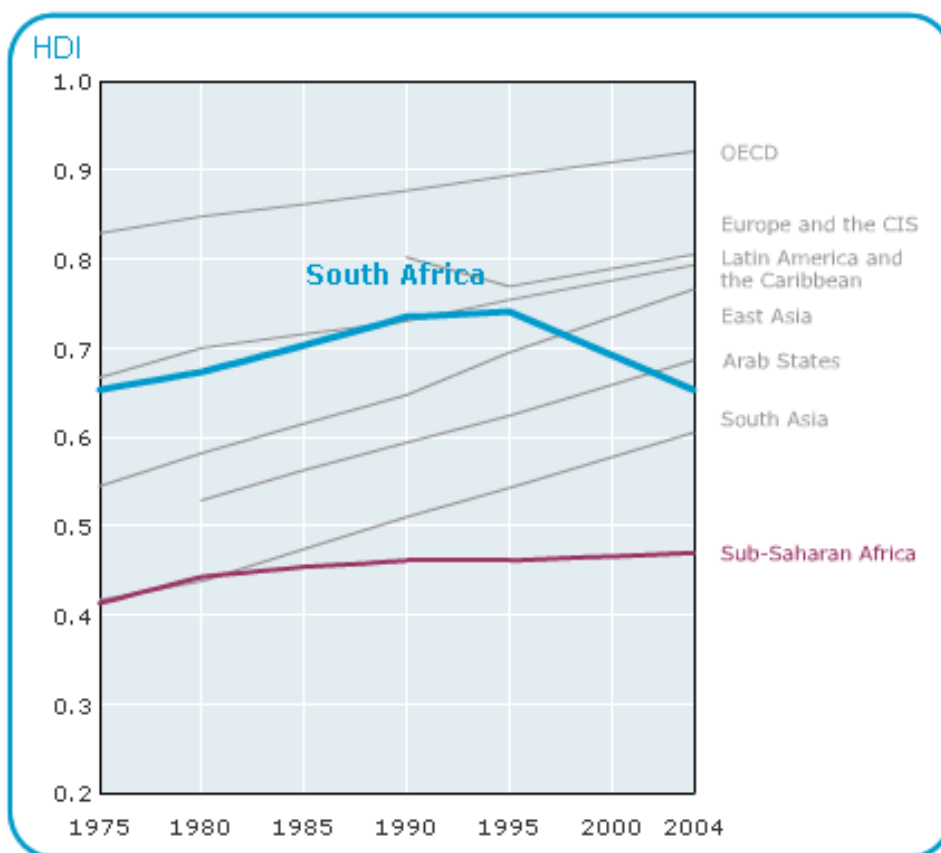


Figure 1: From UNDP Human Development Index, 2005

One way to look at the concern over tensions between equity and quality is to see it as a concern committed to the success of the historically disadvantaged students whether they are black, female, disabled and or poor. If equity is granted to these historically disadvantaged students in such a way that quality is compromised, then such an extension of equity would not be equitable given that the education received would remain inferior to that of historically privileged students.

Table 2: Human Poverty Index and Adult Literacy Rate

<http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/>

Human Poverty Index (HPI-1) 2004	Probability of not surviving past age 40 (%) 2004	Adult illiteracy rate (%ages 15 and older) 2004	Children underweight for age 0-5 (%) 2004
1. Uruguay (3.3)	1. Hong Kong, China (SAR) (1.5)	1. Cuba (0.2)	1. Chile (1)
51. Congo (27.9)	150. Côte d'Ivoire (42.3)	68. Namibia (15.0)	56. Iran, Islamic Rep. of (11)
52. Djibouti (30.0)	151. Guinea-Bissau (42.9)	69. Mauritius (15.6)	57. Malaysia (11)
53. South Africa (30.9)	152. South Africa (43.3)	70. South Africa (17.6)	58. South Africa (12)
54. Sudan (31.3)	153. Cameroon (43.9)	71. Lesotho (17.8)	59. Turkmenistan (12)
55. India (31.3)	154. Tanzania, U. Rep. of (44.4)	72. Oman (18.6)	60. Ecuador (12)
102. Mali (60.2)	172. Swaziland (74.3)	117. Mali (81.0)	134. Nepal (48)

Table 3: The GDI compared to the HDI – a measure of gender disparity

GDI as % of HDI	Life expectancy at birth (years) 2004	Adult literacy rate (% ages 15 and older) 2004	Combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio 2004
-	Female as % male	Female as % male	Female as % male
1. Luxembourg (100.4 %)	1. Russian Federation (122.4 %)	1. Lesotho (122.5 %)	1. United Arab Emirates (126.0 %)
82. Nigeria (99.0 %)	123. Saudi Arabia (105.5 %)	48. Kuwait (96.4 %)	98. Montserrat (101.1 %)
83. Mauritius (99.0 %)	124. Vanuatu (105.5 %)	49. Greece (96.3 %)	99. Cyprus (100.9 %)
84. South Africa (99.0 %)	125. South Africa (105.3 %)	50. South Africa (96.3 %)	100. South Africa (100.9 %)
85. Samoa (Western) (99.0 %)	126. Israel (105.3 %)	51. Namibia (96.2 %)	101. Thailand (100.8 %)
86. Honduras (99.0 %)	127. Macau (105.3 %)	52. Macedonia, TFYR (95.8 %)	102. Mexico (100.5 %)
136. Yemen (94.0 %)	191. Kenya (95.8 %)	115. Afghanistan (29.2 %)	189. Afghanistan (40.9 %)

In other words, I see equity and quality to be articulated issues rather than separate ones. The two issues are intimately connected and give expression to each other. I use articulation in the linguistic sense that Stuart Hall (1980) applied the concept of articulation to race, gender and class relations in societies structured in dominance. Hall was following the work of Harold Wolpe (1979) who used the same concept of political economy to analyze the relationship between capitalism and low wages in the South Africa of the 1970s.

Once we see equity and quality as articulated rather than separate issues, we become immediately aware of something that is missing from the *Bulletin News for the Human Sciences*, vol. 5, No.2, of March 1999 published by the Centre for Science Development in South African on 'Quality Issues in Higher Education'. Forgive me if I am raising issues here that may have been raised in response to the publication by others who read it before me. But the fact that this false contradiction between equity and quality was still being raised at the time of my visit encouraged me to believe that it was yet to be resolved.

What I find missing from the Bulletin is an awareness that Apartheid did not simply harm the historically disadvantaged; racism also damaged the historically privileged as Frantz Fanon (1963) and Albert Memmi (1991) convincingly demonstrated with reference to colonialism and psychosis. An educational system that lacks equity is essentially lacking in some aspects of quality. Such an educational system will train students who are supposedly privileged but who would be given a false sense of superiority when they lack adequate knowledge of the multicultural world in which we live today. Such an educational system would also miss the opportunity to discover new geniuses who were excluded simply because of essentialist assumptions based on their physical rather than intellectual attributes.

To remedy this historical wrong, the democratic government of South Africa, university administrators and Faculty members are right in emphasizing the need to offer remedial classes to historically disadvantaged students to better equip them with skills to compete on a level playing field. The policy of remedy also includes better funding for historically disadvantaged institutions to improve their competitiveness. However, remedial classes for the historically disadvantaged and better funding for the historically deprived would not be adequate for tackling centuries-old systems of privilege and oppression that are still very much alive. There are still individuals and institutions that fought with conviction to defend the system of Apartheid and they are still convinced of the moral superiority of that order compared to the democratic order of the present.

The policy of remedy in place today implicitly subscribes to a racist stereotype that black students are less intelligent until proven otherwise. There is evidence that black children in Britain and America are more likely to be labeled as having learning difficulties. Such stigmatization easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of teachers who expect that black students must perform worse than white students and on the part of black students who come to believe that to succeed academically, they need to stop being black.

The need to train administrators and faculty members on the importance of diversity awareness and multiculturalism in the classroom is not even mentioned. Having participated in the running of such workshops for new faculty members and administrators in a predominantly white American university, I suspect that such workshops are not popular perhaps because there remains an assumption that the historically disadvantaged are the only ones who need to be remedied. Yet some colleges in America continue to offer such workshops that tend to preach to the choir of believers while those administrators and faculty members who need them most tend to be very hostile to the idea.

I would like to propose such equity workshops for universities in South Africa as part and parcel of the efforts to improve quality. If a professor holds on to the idea that black students need remedial classes because they are historically disadvantaged, such a professor would be poorly prepared to deal with an excellent black student who may or may not have undergone remedial classes. The persistence of such an assumption on the part of instructors and administrators will inevitably affect the quality of education offered to all students. For example, a recent experiment in America exposed prejudiced individuals to interaction with members of minority ethnic groups. Following such interaction, they were tested on cognitive skills and they performed poorly, suggesting that racist beliefs in a multicultural society actually makes people dumb or dumber.

A related problem is the danger of stigmatization that remedial classes for only the historically disadvantaged could produce. Such a danger could be checked by emphasizing the benefits that historically disadvantaged students and faculty members bring to historically privileged institutions. Steve Biko called it the benefit of educating white liberals when he was challenged by colleagues to explain why he invited a white man to the Township. There is no need to add that Donald Woods benefited immensely from the multicultural education that the historically disadvantaged provided for him. He became a better journalist and his paper became better in quality to such an extent that the Apartheid government saw him as a threat. And when his life was threatened, the practical skills that he learnt from the masses helped to save his life by facilitating his escape with his family. No one who has seen the movie, *Cry Freedom*, would doubt that it was Steve Biko (played by Denzel Washington) who made Donald Woods a star and not vice versa.

The point that diversity improves quality in higher education was further confirmed in an experiment by the American Sociological Association. Twelve departments of Sociology were tested to determine the quality of their programs. Then they were asked to adopt diversity policies. Afterwards, they were tested again and they all reported improved quality as a result of the diversity. Yet I have heard a misinformed college president in a predominantly white institution in America publicly tell the faculty that although the government wanted him to pursue the performance indicator of diversity among other indicators, he did not believe that diversity contributes to academic standards. Such an administrator would not be qualified to run a Coca Cola or Macdonald's shop because these companies explicitly pursue diversity as part of what makes them more competitive.

The need for diversity as a route to improved quality is obviously more crucial for academic institutions than for Coca Cola because quality in education is defined primarily in terms of originality. As Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argued, the exclusion of black feminist perspectives from academic establishments impoverishes the academy given the unique perspectives that black women bring to the table as outsiders within who are familiar with black homes and white homes that they have been running jointly for centuries. It is for such reasons that Alvin Gouldner (1972) answered the challenging question posed by Howard Becker (1967) - Whose Side are we on? - by stating that we should be on the side of the underdog because the perspective of the underdog is more likely to be original while the perspective of the privileged is more likely to be well-known. An international comparison on the issue of equity in education identified the key issues as follows:

Equity and efficiency are two obviously important considerations in the analysis of the education sector. In this paper we focus on the issue of equity.' In general, two complementary approaches may be taken to address this issue. In the first, and more classical approach, the analysis takes the school as a given entity and focuses mainly on the question of who gets into school. Commonly, comparisons are made between the characteristics (sex, socioeconomic background, ethnic or geographic origin, etc.) of the enrolled population and those of the reference population in the country At a deeper level, such analyses often lead to an examination of the reasons for differences in the access to education among different population groups: for example, how do procedures regarding admission, examination (oral or written), and promotion affect social selectivity, and to what extent do policies on financing, school mapping, and curriculum affect the social composition of the student body? The issue of who gets into school, and why, may be expanded to include the question of how students with different social backgrounds perform in school. Analyses of this type try to examine the achievement of students in relation to not only their personal and social characteristics, but also their access to such school resources as availability of books, teacher qualification, class size, heterogeneity of the class, library facilities, and so on... (Mingat, and TAN, 1985).

In conclusion, the employment of historically disadvantaged professors is required by the South African government not as an act of charity for such professors but because they could add to the quality of programs by bringing diverse perspectives. At a time that the number of black students in South African tertiary institutions who are enrolled in historically privileged institutions has increased from 25% in 1993 to 53% in 2000, there is a need for such institutions that are benefiting at the expense of historically black institutions by attracting the best black students to realize that they need to do more to make sure that those students excel instead of stigmatizing them. The target of the government is for 40% all students in tertiary education to be black and while this modest target is yet to be reached in a country

that is 70% black, the institutions should realize that it is only a target and not a quota. In other words, nothing stops an institution from exceeding the target except the fact that while enrolment is increasing, funding is actually decreasing. The government should realize how irrational such a funding policy is and strive to make more funds available for higher education by for example, funding all the tuition fees and making it possible for all students to get free university education.

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